



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

CHILD WELFARE

## *Realistic Job Preview:*

*A Review of the Literature and Recommendations*



Prepared by  
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# Realistic Job Preview

## Cornerstones for Kids Introduction

The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork render otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields. It is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to

- β Call greater attention to workforce issues
- β Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce
- β Disseminate data on current conditions
- β Highlight best and promising practices
- β Suggest systemic and policy actions that can make a deep, long term difference

Staff turnover plagues many human services agencies. It generates costs and inefficiencies and can impact the quality of services provided. Too often, staff turnover within a year or two of being hired – frequently because they did not understand the nature of the work when they first applied. In this paper CPS Human Resource Services describes how “realistic job previews” can help agencies and applicants avoid misunderstanding and screen out candidates whose interests and preferences lie elsewhere.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at [www.cornerstones4kids.org](http://www.cornerstones4kids.org).

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# Introduction

A realistic job preview (RJP) is a recruiting approach that is designed to communicate both the desirable and undesirable aspects of a job before an applicant has accepted a job offer. Research has demonstrated that many applicants know little about the jobs for which they are applying or, worse yet, have certain expectations and/or perceptions about the job which are totally inaccurate. Oftentimes, when newly hired employees' expectations are not met, they become so unhappy with the job that they quit. A major reason for employees' quitting a job within the first six months or year is that they came to the conclusion that they made a bad career choice. Evidence shows that for certain kinds of jobs, well-designed RJP's that are provided to the applicant at the right time in the application process can have a significant impact on reducing early turnover.

One of the foremost industrial psychologists who has studied the impact of RJP's extensively suggests that two match-ups occur when a new person is hired. The employer matches the job requirements with the individual's qualifications and the individual matches his/her human needs with the organizational culture and the specific job's requirements. The first match probably has the greatest impact on performance while the second match has the greatest effect on satisfaction and tenure (Wanous, 1977).

RJP's can be found in a variety of formats, including videos, verbal presentations, job tours, and written brochures. Certain formats may be more successful with particular kinds of jobs or with a particular audience, but use of multiple formats is likely to be most effective.

Research on turnover shows that satisfaction levels fall and turnover tends to be highest during the first six months to one year. This suggests that new workers are misled by organizations trying to "sell themselves" or that job applicants have complete misimpressions about the nature of the work/organizations (Harvey, 1990).

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## Relevant Research

A significant amount of research has been conducted over the past three decades on the impact that RJPs have on job applicants' and employees' career decisions. The research can be divided into three distinct, but highly interrelated, areas: 1) impact on turnover; 2) impact on job acceptance; and 3) impact on post-employment job satisfaction. Most of the research, by far, has been focused on the reduction in turnover of new employees. It has been suggested that turnover is a concrete behavior that is easier to measure than job attitudes and that turnover reduction is the major reason for the use of the RJP (Popovich and Wanous, 1982). However, it has been argued that turnover is a relatively insensitive measure of RJP effectiveness (Breugh, 1983). Breugh argues that people may stay in unsatisfying jobs because they have limited alternatives and, conversely, people leave highly satisfying jobs for a multitude of unrelated reasons. He would suggest that job satisfaction is a better measure of RJP effectiveness than job survival. On the other hand, Wanous maintains that while it is useful to measure the impact of the RJP on a variety of criteria (e.g., job attitude, job performance, and organizational commitment) it makes more sense to focus on job survival as the key practical criterion in evaluating RJPs (Wanous, 1992).

The relationship among applicants' job acceptance, turnover, and post-employment job satisfaction is obvious. All are associated with the individual's perception of how his/her needs will be met on the job. The research suggests that RJPs have an impact on the decision of job seekers to accept or reject job offers based on their belief that the offered jobs will meet their needs. If those research findings are valid, one would expect turnover to be lower among those exposed to RJPs because the borderline candidates have weeded themselves out. Research also suggests that a residual benefit of exposure to a RJP is greater job satisfaction resulting from fewer "surprises" on the job, perceptions of employer honesty in the recruitment process, and so on.

The research findings summarized below are considered to be the most relevant to the issues and circumstances encountered in a human services/social work setting.

### ***Impact on Turnover***

The primary reason employers use realistic job previews is their assumption that the RJP will result in employees' having greater job satisfaction, and consequently lower turnover. In attempting to explain why RJPs have an impact on employee satisfaction and turnover, James A. Breugh theorizes that there are four distinct, yet interrelated, basic psychological processes that influence the effectiveness of RJPs. He characterizes them as *met expectations*, *ability to cope*, *air of honesty*, and *self-selection* (Breugh, 1983).

With regard to met expectations, it is theorized that RJPs lower job expectations and these lower expectations are more consistent with the actual job. It is therefore assumed that those

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whose expectations are met are more likely to be satisfied with the job and, thus, less likely to leave voluntarily.

Another way in which RJPs may influence satisfaction and turnover is by improving the new employee's ability to cope with the demands of the new job. The assumption is that employees who are made aware of the problems to be faced on the job are better able to cope with them when they arise and, thus, are less likely to leave.

A third explanation for the impact of RJPs is that they communicate an "air of honesty" to applicants. New employees theoretically feel more committed to their decision to accept a job because they made the decision based on perceived honest representations. Conversely, those who feel misled by recruiting strategies designed to "sell the organization" do not feel committed to their decision to accept a job and are more likely to leave.

Finally, with regard to self-selection, it is assumed that jobs that are realistically portrayed will not be perceived by all applicants as meeting their needs. Those who realize that their needs will not be met will presumably withdraw from the application process. In all likelihood, that same job portrayal will appeal to other job applicants as meeting their needs and result in acceptance of a job offer.

A major finding in a 1985 meta-analysis of 21 RJP studies is that the RJP lowers the new employee's initial job expectations (Premack and Wanous, 1985). Although this finding in itself may not seem particularly significant, a major purpose of an RJP is to lower the expectation so that the new employee doesn't become dissatisfied when overly inflated expectations are not met. Because RJPs bring about a greater alignment between expectations and reality, they can have a significant impact on the reduction of early turnover and can lead to substantial employee-replacement cost savings (Wanous, 1989).

In his most recent review of published RJP studies to date, Wanous found that job survival increased in 11 of the 13 private sector experiments he reviewed.<sup>1</sup> When comparing the survival rate for the RJP group to the control group in the 13 experiments, he found that the RJP resulted in an average gain in job survival of 12 percent. The survival rate ranged from no gain to an increase of 48 percent (Wanous, 1992).

In one of the most recent studies, A. D. Martin conducted research on the impact of the RJP on turnover frequency, turnover functionality, and cost effectiveness. Her work involved the study of newly recruited real estate agents, a job with very high turnover within the first six to twelve months. The job is often misunderstood by the applicant and is characterized by low pay, weekend and evening hours, and a number of other undesirable characteristics. In Martin's experiment, turnover within the first year was 15 percent for the RJP group and 35 percent for the control group (a group of similarly situated real estate job applicants who were not given the RJP). Furthermore, her work suggests that the RJP had a positive effect on turnover functionality, meaning that the turnover which did occur was more frequent among

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<sup>1</sup> The many studies conducted within the military were not included.



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the poorer performers. She also showed the RJP to be cost effective, with an estimated return on investment ratio of approximately 5:1 in her specific study (Martin, 1996).

Another finding from the above mentioned meta-analysis is that the value of the RJP increases as the severity of the turnover increases (Premack and Wanous, 1985). In other words, the impact of using a RJP will be greater in those occupations or organizations where turnover is high than in those where turnover is relatively low.

Another extensive review of the literature suggests that RJP's are most effective where the job being recruited for is a) complex or difficult; b) experiencing high rates of early turnover; or c) has important aspects that are unknown or misunderstood by the applicant (Martin, 1996). Based on these findings, positions in child welfare seem to be ideally suited to the use of the RJP because they are certainly complex and difficult jobs, they experience a high rate of early turnover, and applicants often have a total misunderstanding of what the jobs are really like.

### ***Impact on Job Acceptance***

One would expect that a well-designed RJP would have the effect of causing some job applicants to have second thoughts about their career choices and withdraw from the application process. Martin's research provided empirical evidence that more job candidates in the RJP group declined the job offer (36.1 percent) compared to the control group (9.2 percent) (Martin, 1996).

PETSMART, the Phoenix-based chain of over 300 pet supply stores, shows job applicants a 10 minute RJP video, which the company believes screens out about 15 percent of the applicants. The screened-out applicants are those believed to be most likely to leave within the first three months (Lifson, 1996).

Breaugh suggests that a very significant variable in determining the RJP's impact on job acceptance is the applicants' opportunities for alternative employment. In order for the RJP to be effective, the applicant must feel free to turn down a job that is perceived, based on the RJP, as not meeting his or her needs (Breaugh, 1983). One critical variable might be the rate of unemployment. An applicant often accepts a job, even knowing that it will not be a good fit, simply because any job is better than no job. Another possible dilemma that impacts perceived freedom of choice is faced by the applicant who has academically prepared for a specific career (e.g., teaching, nursing, or social work). Even upon learning about the negative aspects of the job through the RJP, applicants may not yet be emotionally capable of accepting the fact that they have prepared for the wrong career. A well-known psychological finding is that energy expenditure increases commitment (Wanous, 1992).

Meglino, Ravlin, and DeNisi conducted research to determine if the presentation of negative information in an RJP unduly reduces job acceptance. Their finding among applicants for corrections officer jobs concluded that the effect of negative information is over-inflated for applicants with prior job exposure, but not for those unfamiliar with the job. Their recommendation is that the amount of negative information be moderated when the applicant



pool consists primarily of applicants with prior job exposure (Meglino, Ravlin, and DeNisi, 1997). Though not specifically stated, the implication is that negative information be disproportionately included in RJPs where applicants are unfamiliar with the job and where high turnover occurs among new employees.

### ***Impact on Post-Employment Job Satisfaction***

Several studies have been conducted to determine if the use of the RJP has any impact on the ability of the new employee to cope with the stresses found on the new job. It is suggested that the coping mechanism is strengthened either because employees are less disturbed by problems about which they have been forewarned or because they have pre-rehearsed methods for handling them (Breaugh, 1983). There is evidence to suggest that the RJP helps new employees cope with the demands of the new job by better preparing them for what to expect. The underlying theory is that employees who are aware of the negative aspects of the position before accepting it have perhaps subconsciously decided how to handle the stresses and internalized that into their decision to accept the job or not. Those who are caught by surprise after accepting the job are often incapable of adapting (Pitt and Ramaseshan, 1995).

RJPs have been associated with greater job satisfaction for new employees. Not surprisingly, dissatisfaction often occurs when the new employee is surprised to find that the job is not as expected. Job satisfaction is also increased when the new employee believes that the employer has been honest and forthright in its recruitment efforts (Meglino et al., 1988). As stated above, job satisfaction may be associated with, but necessarily predictive of, turnover. Dissatisfied employees remain on the job because they lack other opportunities and satisfied employees must leave jobs for a variety of unrelated reasons.

When a new employee's job expectations are not met, the employee may exhibit disappointment through higher absenteeism, lowered productivity, and job termination (Baker, 1985). Related research on the effects of "met expectations" (though not specifically related to RJPs) supports the notion that having accurate expectations leads to increased job satisfaction, greater organizational commitment, a stronger intent to remain in the organization, and slightly improved job performance (Wanous, 1992).

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# Use of RJPs in Human Services Organizations

## Nebraska

The Nebraska Health and Human Services System (which includes the agency that provides child welfare services in Nebraska) partnered with the University of Nebraska's Center on Children, Families, and the Law in 1998 to develop a RJP in a videotape format to use in the recruitment of child welfare workers. The video is approximately 28 minutes in length and uses a combination of agency caseworkers and supervisors (in a documentary interview style format) and professional actors (to act out various scenes depicting situations encountered in children's services work).

Job applicants are required to view the RJP prior to being interviewed. The videotape is available at the state's colleges of social work, libraries, employment offices, and human services agency offices.

Research findings on the effectiveness of the video are scant. Early on, viewers of the video were encouraged to return postcards responding to certain questions about the video. The responses demonstrated that the video did result in some potential applicants deciding not to follow through with the application process (no specific percentage was given). Although it is believed that the use of the RJP has had some impact on turnover, it has never been formally documented. Apparently the rush to put the video into use affected the decision not to test its effectiveness.

Dr. Michelle Graef, PhD, of UNL Center on Children, Families, and the Law, identified the following benefits of the RJP in a workshop at the NSDTA 15<sup>th</sup> Annual National Conference:

- ⌘ Provides applicants the opportunity to self-select out of the selection process at an early stage, prior to extensive investment by the organization or the applicant
- ⌘ Helps reduce the organization's costs of testing, interviewing, and training applicants who are unsure about their fit for the job and may quit shortly after starting
- ⌘ Improves the fit between applicants and the demands of the job. Applicants are able to make knowledgeable, informed decisions regarding the organization, which can lead to greater commitment and job satisfaction.
- ⌘ Improved relations with job applicants and newly hired staff. The organization is viewed as more open, honest, and trustworthy.
- ⌘ Increases job survival of staff who are hired

## **Illinois**

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services partnered with Governor's State University to create a video to be used as an RJP for child protection jobs. At the time of this writing, the video is virtually complete, but it has not been used as part of the recruitment effort. Because the department is under a stringent hiring freeze, finalizing the video has not been a priority. At this point, only final minor editing remains to be completed.

A management group determined the strategy and purpose of the video, and focus groups were convened to identify the specific elements of the job and major points they wanted to communicate in the video. They wanted to keep it balanced between the positive and negative aspects of the job.

Video footage was gathered by following six caseworkers around for two days each while they performed their regular duties. Hour-long interviews were also conducted with each of them in their offices, and they were asked specific questions about the job (e.g., what they liked and disliked about the job, impact on family life, and so on). Approximately 16 hours of footage was videotaped. The six caseworkers were selected from a group recommended by regional management. Several candidates were brought to the video studio for an audition in which they were interviewed while being videotaped. The producers looked for "camera savvy" people and selected a demographically diverse group. One was selected from each of Illinois's six regions.

None of the video was scripted, and no professional actors were used. The persons portrayed as clients actually were departmental clients who consented to be included in the video. The department stated that it had an idea of what it wanted to accomplish and produced the video "documentary style." The final version is approximately 30 minutes long.

## **Delaware**

Delaware's Department of Family Services has been using a RJP video, entitled "A Day in the Life of a Caseworker," since 1998. The suggestion to produce the video was made by a caseworker during a focus group meeting to discuss suggestions for reducing turnover among children's services workers. Within a few weeks following the meeting, the caseworker was invited to meet with department administrators to further develop the idea and solidify plans to produce the video. A local video production company was hired to produce the video, and all of the characters in the video were caseworkers, a police officer and a former client. No professional actors were used. The footage was shot within a week, and final editing was completed within the next few weeks. Overall, the length of time to produce the video, from the initial suggestion to the finished product, was only a few months. The total running time of the video is approximately 22 minutes.

All job applicants are required to watch the video, normally when they come for the job interview. It is believed that the video has had an impact on reducing turnover, but nothing

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has ever been documented. Although Delaware sees the benefit of making the video available to job applicants earlier in the application process or before the process has begun (e.g., during social work classes) the agency chose to limit the distribution of the video because of concerns arising from the fact that Miranda Rights were not given by the police officer during an arrest scene.

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## Recommendations from the Literature

John Wanous offers several recommendations on implementing a successful RJP: (Wanous, 1989).

- β **Descriptive vs. Judgmental:** Judgmental information is probably more effective than just descriptive information. The RJP needs to focus on the issues which cause turnover or result in survival. Focus on the things that satisfy and dissatisfy. Naive job candidates need information delivered in a more compelling way.
- β **Extensive vs. Intensive:** If one tries to broad brush the whole job, the applicant will likely miss the most important information. It may be better to focus forcefully on the issues that are most important, correlate with turnover, and are misperceived by recruits.
- β **High vs. Medium Negativity:** A medium amount of negativity usually encourages only a modest degree of self-selection. Overly negative content may discourage some good applicants and may have a negative impact on their coping mechanisms if they take the job.
- β **Early vs. Late Timing:** Using the RJP early in the application process (or before) may be more effective because candidates become more invested in the job as they exert more effort in the application process.
- β **Explicitly Encourage Self-Selection:** Job applicants should be told the purpose of showing the RJP both at the beginning and the end of the presentation. By telling the candidate to consider the RJP information carefully and to make a thoughtful decision about accepting an employment offer, the organization presents itself as being caring and trustworthy as well as encouraging the applicant to make an effective job choice (Wanous, 1992).

Roth and Roth recommend that the “spirit” of the RJP be present during all phases of the recruiting process, including on-campus recruiting, the RJP video, information shared during the interview, and all informal contacts. The RJP spirit is one of openness, honesty, and candidness (Roth and Roth, 1995).

Pitt and Ramaseshan recommend that RJP information be “accurate, relevant and detailed.” Volume of information alone has little impact on turnover (Pitt and Ramaseshan, 1995). In fact, providing too much information may dilute the message and make the impact of the RJP less successful.

Breaugh and Billings recommend that five key attributes be included in an RJP. They include accuracy, specificity, breadth of scope, credibility, and importance (Breaugh and Billings,

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1988). Specifically, based on their research, they found that RJPs have the most significant impact on applicants' decisions to accept a job offer and on turnover if

- β The information presented accurately portrays both the positive and negative aspects of the job.
- β The information presented deals with a job very specifically, rather than a broad-brush overview of the job or the organization.
- β The information presented provides several aspects of the job rather than focusing on only a few elements.
- β The information presented appears to come from a credible source. Typically employees currently performing the job are one of the most credible sources.
- β The information presented is that which is the most important for the applicant to know before deciding to accept the job offer.

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## Conclusions

Based on a review of the research literature and the experiences of several child welfare agencies, it appears that the development of a realistic job preview to be used in the recruitment of children's protective services and foster care workers will very likely result in a reduction in early turnover. To realize the maximum potential of the RJP, it is recommended that the agency:

- ℬ Require that all applicants view the RJP video prior to submitting the application or at least prior to the job interview
- ℬ Balance the positive and negative elements of the jobs in the video or overemphasize the negative elements somewhat
- ℬ Explain in the video why it is being shown to applicants, and encourage them to make a thoughtful decision about accepting the job offer
- ℬ Carefully select the workers who will be featured in the video to ensure that they can credibly articulate both the pros and cons of the jobs
- ℬ Focus the video content on those issues believed to have an impact on job survival. Emphasize the judgmental (i.e., emotional) rather than the descriptive information. In other words, those employees featured in the video should focus more on how they feel about the job rather than on the mechanics of the job.
- ℬ Develop and provide a written brochure that reinforces the content of the video



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